

BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL WILLIAM CALDWELL,
SPOKESMAN,
MULTINATIONAL FORCE IRAQ

LOCATION: PENTAGON BRIEFING ROOM, ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

GEN. CALDWELL: Hey, Jack, Bill Caldwell.

JACK HOLT (spokesman for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers): Good morning,
sir, and welcome to another bloggers roundtable. Appreciate you taking the time to be
with us this morning.

GEN. CALDWELL: No, I appreciate everybody being here.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. If you'd like, we can -- if you've got an opening statement, or we can just get started, however you prefer.

GEN. CALDWELL: Let me try -- what I'll do is I'll give you about a one, two minute just sort of intel update that might be useful to help set some of the situation over here, and then I'll go from there and take whatever anybody wants.

What I'd tell you right now is Operation Fard al-Qanun has continued with the operations inside the city. We now have 50 of 75 joint security station and combat outposts established and functioning, and we're working towards putting the other 25 in. And as we continue reassessing what's going on inside of Baghdad and the surrounding area there, we may in fact increase that number even above 75. But right now, 75 plan to be created; 50 have been created, so about 25 more to go.

We do, in fact, see that this has denied the ability of insurgent elements movement within the city. It's starting to have an effect that we can actually see. Part of that's the reductions in the number of sectarian murders and assassinations and then also in the reduction in the number of car bombs and how freely they used to be able to generally move in the city, how much more difficult that's become.

I would say AQI is going to continue to attempt high-casualty, you know, headline-grabbing attacks both in their target areas, where they had been targeting within Baghdad, but as we see now and have for the last two weeks, they've moving outside into areas that are as -- not as intensely manned and occupied by security forces as -- isn't within Baghdad itself. The goal, I'd say, remains for, you know, fomenting chaos while trying to discredit the -- one, the government of Iraq and its ability to provide security for the people, and two, to discredit the Iraqi security forces themselves as they stand up and start taking on more responsibility and become more capable, literally almost every week, as they continue their operations. We think they'll continue -- focus on trying to sustain these current attack levels they've kind of reached here in the last two or three weeks.

I'd say the militia groups -- and if you talk specifically about Jaish al-Mahdi, its ability to act in a coherent, organized manner has been degraded. We can see some fracturing that's occurred for various reasons, if you were to try to assess why. But that has had some of the impact, too. And we think that may be part of the reason why we're seeing much greater cooperation occurring within Sadr City as we continue operations there, now having actually done clearing of about 40 percent of that city, and still have the joint security station that has been established operating within Sadr City itself.

I'd say those are the big things. Just trying to think through -- the third of five of our reinforcing brigades have now arrived inside of Iraq. This third brigade that just arrived is actually the 3rd Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division. But it's getting set and should be able to commence operations here within about the next week.

And then, of course, the 3rd Infantry Division headquarters has arrived within Iraq. And it's moving towards what we call fully operational capability. And we would

expect to see that within the next seven days, once the last of its systems are all checked out and -- for it to begin full operations too within Iraq.

So with that, I'll take whatever questions anybody has.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. And Blake, if you'd like to go first, since you were first on the line.

Q Thank you, General. The debate back home is about the funding, and there seems to be some discrepancy between when exactly the Congress's failure to fund the war is going to start affecting the troops on the ground. And the administration is saying that that is going to be -- begin occurring in April and hit a critical moment in May. Democrats are saying that it won't occur until midsummer, July. I was wondering if you could shed any light on when you are going to start getting worried about the lack of funds.

GEN. CALDWELL: You know, it's interesting you asked that question. I just walked out of a press conference that we do -- we started to do at least one a week over here. That question was not even asked, and I really had anticipated that probably being a primary question.

It's interesting. I link up with you all, and you all -- right away, that's the one thing that -- (laughter) -- and I'll tell you, if you watch the debate back in the United States, you know, I'm an Army guy. My chief of staff, you know, taking off my Joint hat, the chief of staff of the Army back there has stated that -- you know, he's been very clear on when that's going to start having an impact on the United States Army. And that's relatively soon, according to him. And I think he has always been a very straightforward caller, like no-nonsense kind of guy. So I would put a lot of credence into whatever he said back there.

Again, I don't know because I'm not back there. But I can tell you from over here, it's going to have an immediate impact in the sense that the MNSTC-I element that we have is charged with building, equipping, helping to develop the Iraqi security forces, and that is going to have an impact on them. Now to what degree? You know, we can get into a lot more specifics, but they are already starting to feel the effects of not having this funding.

Again now, from the U.S. combat forces on the ground, it has not had an impact on us. We still have what we need to conduct our operations. But MNSTC-I, which is charged with, you know, the Title X responsibilities associated in very simplistic form with the Iraqi security forces -- it does have an impact today and will only get more pronounced with time.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, Sean.

Q Jack, I'm going to pass my question this time and just keep listening.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right, Victoria.

Q Good morning, General Caldwell. This is Victoria Coates with Red State.

Just to follow up on that quickly, the idea of the ISF bearing the immediate brunt of the funding lack -- I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about their performance over the last two months, and how integral they've been to the Baghdad security operation, and how effective you think you can be if their readiness starts to deteriorate.

GEN. CALDWELL: I've been here almost a year now. And I can tell you that from a year ago when I first got here to now, and I'm out, you know, every week someplace, having the ability to get out and go around the country -- that, you know, they continue to get better all the time.

From better equipment, more capable leadership and the quality of their young soldiers as they develop the professionalism inside their force, it's going to still take time, but is beginning to take hold. Obviously, they're not going to be anywhere near the capabilities and the professionalism of our force any time soon, but they're moving forward, which is the important thing, and they are getting better all the time.

Obviously, we count on them very much. As part of this Fard al-Qanun, they brought into the city about 4,500 extra troops, nine battalions, with some headquarters, but they brought in nine additional infantry battalions. And again, when I go back a year ago, the idea of even trying to move one Iraqi battalion was unheard of. About six months ago, if we attempted to move Iraqi army battalions, it was a significant challenge and we were not always successful; and when we did move them, it was very painful and it was unsustainable.

Today they've moved nine battalions into the city, as they said they would. They got them there. They've come in at varying levels of overall strength, some very good, some needing additional troops brought in to bring it up to strength. But they've moved all nine, and they're already starting to work the plans on how they would do the rotation out of those nine and bring nine more in. I mean, that is just an incredible step forward, to have developed that capability over the last year from non-existent last year this time to today they've moved nine in and they're going so far as now talking about rotating those nine in and out, which is just an incredible step forward for them to have that planning, discussions, mapping it out and then going and executing it.

Obviously, we would like to see the Iraqi security forces continue to grow and develop. There's plans on the shelf, as you know, to kick it up. You know, the prime minister has some initiatives out there that he's going to grow the size of the Iraqi security forces, and that's all been funded and planned for, and everybody's moving out on that.

But at the current moment, because of this lack of funding, MNSTC-I is unable to continue at the pace they were in the developmental process of the Iraqi security forces. And, you know, obviously we're looking at that real closely and it is starting to have some -- an impact today and will only, you know, have more of an impact over time.

Q Thank you.

MAJ. STROUD: All right. Alex.

Q Yeah, hi. This is Alex Melonas from Gun Toting Liberal.

GEN. CALDWELL: Hey, Alex.

MAJ. STROUD: Go ahead.

Q I have a question regarding the Iraqi casualties.

GEN. CALDWELL: Uh-huh.

Q Per a recent report by the Council on Foreign Relations released a month ago (on the 7th ?) -- they surveyed various -- various sources for Iraqi casualties, and they cited a few -- apparently a lot of sources. One was Johns Hopkins University. Just to display a discrepancy, they found that around 600,000 Iraqis had been killed since the overthrow of Saddam, where the official estimate by the Iraqi government is closer to 450,000.

Now, as of February of '07, (there are discrepancies of polls ?) that found that while the U.S. public does know the death toll for U.S. servicemembers, yet the leading estimate for Iraqi deaths is around 10,000. Now, this staggering ignorance of the human cost of this war is a question that I think is of interest to everybody down here. Now, one, is why doesn't the military maintain the records of the Iraqi casualties? And, two, coupled with the public opinions that were polled of the Iraqis polled that suggest that there is a majority rule that's in opposition to the presence of U.S. combat forces, are the soldiers in any way affected by that -- the belief in their mission, is it challenged as they witness Iraqi and Iraqi violence continue unabated to some degree? Can you discuss that?

GEN. CALDWELL: Yeah. First, I'll tell you, we obviously keep a lot of statistics over here. I mean, I think it actually overwhelms somebody to see how many statistics we keep of different things. But we're very hesitant to put out statistical data. We do it for us in order to have it so that we can use to determine whether or not we need to adjust our practice, techniques and procedures we're using in our operations and to look at it overall from a strategic perspective.

But, you know, anybody can challenge statistics any day of the week. I mean, in a perfect world -- (chuckles) -- you sit a couple of, you know, research analysis people in the same room and they can argue all day long about statistics. So our intent is, when we do this, is to use it for internal use to make sure that we're aware of and tracking however we do it -- at least so that we do it consistently and it can give us some good trend lines. And we don't mind releasing trend lines (in talking ?) what the trending data is. But people could argue with us all day long as to, well, you didn't properly collect it here, you didn't get that or -- the key is, you know, we just want to make sure we're doing it the same way all the time so we can use it to influence how we do do things.

I mean, that's the big thing about trying to release different kinds of statistical data out there.

I mean, you know, I read a report the other day where it said -- in some open-source press, that the number of Iraqi security force casualties, you know, as compared to coalition casualties, you know, was way down. And so, you know, I went and pulled it up and I said, okay, I wonder what we have. And what we found, in fact, when we looked at the week ending on 30 March, if we took that one for example, whereas total coalition casualties, when you take those that were killed and those that were wounded was 150. When I looked at the Iraqi security casualty figures, they were at just over 320. So some newspaper -- and I don't recall what the open source was, was reporting they were significantly lower than ours because we were out there in front and sustaining more casualties, and in fact, it was really just the exact opposite. You know, we had had 10 killed that week; the Iraqis had had over 50 killed that week. So -- you know, out of that total number.

So I always do worry about, you know, casualty stuff -- or not casualty -- but any kind of statistical data you see put out there.

I mean, I don't know if that helps some, if that's starting to answer the question you're trying to get at.

Q Well, can I just ask a quick follow-up?

GEN. CALDWELL: Sure. No, no, please do, because I'm trying to make sure I answer the question you want to ask.

Q Yeah, it's merely just a question highlighting the discrepancy in the official estimates. As I said, the Iraqi government released in '06 the number was closer to 40,000 to 60,000. But the Iraqi health minister, Shamari, he was on record on estimating between 100,000-150,000 Iraqi casualties and killed in violent acts, okay? And now the U.S., in response to that discrepancy, Samuel Gardner, who's a retired Air Force colonel, argued that the U.S. military is in the best position to count the casualties as they have the presence and the resources, but for public relations reasons, they don't collect these stats. Now, their motivation is not to have a body -- I mean, he goes on to challenge the presence there.

But as a way to better inform the public back home, I understand you're timid about releasing stats because you're correct that statistics can be a challenge, but when there's intense discrepancy, like the ones that we see, and an intense ignorance regardless by U.S. citizens of that human cost on the Iraqi side, I'm wondering why the U.S. military doesn't really take great stock in that and release those. And further, I mean, coupled with those public opinion polls that show that the majority will in Iraq does stand in opposition to our presence, and it's a suggested poll, but it does suggest that nonetheless, are the soldiers affected by that at all? Are they -- is troop morale, the common rhetoric back here, is that affected by that as they witness Iraqi-on-Iraqi deaths -- (inaudible) -- rise?

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay. Let me just say -- okay, first of all on the figures, we do track in a consistent manner the Iraqi civilian casualties. And when we see reporting by the government of Iraq that is very different than ours, we do bring it to the government of Iraq's attention and provide them with the data that we have so they can use that to go back and assess how they arrived at their numbers, so they can look at it.

So we do make sure that they know if they reported 10 and we're showing two, we'll go to them and say, "Look, from all our sources -- and this is kind of how we do it -- we only had two reported where you're reporting 10, and we just want to make sure you know. So if you want to reassess that figure you can; if not, you know, we're not going to -- you're a sovereign nation. You're going to report it how you want."

But there are a lot of different ways that kind of data is collected, depending on what ministry you're from, where they went and collected the data from. I mean, we've dug into these things in excruciating detail, especially civilian casualties, from using multiple means and methods to derive these numbers, and it is very difficult and it's very challenging. But we feel -- at least we do -- that we actually have a fairly good ability to at least do it consistently every month. That, then, does tell you whether or not you're seeing an increase or a decrease in the overall numbers.

As far as our presence and the opposition, as you say, here's what I would tell you. A perfect example. I'm out in Fallujah here a couple weeks ago, and I'm with the police chief and he's a Sunni, and I'm commenting about the fact I just left all these checkpoints that come in and out of the city. It's sort of almost -- Fallujah's almost a gated-type community, as we would think of in the United States nowadays, and they've got an ID card system for the people and everything else. It's very well done out there. But I was talking to him because the Iraqi army unit out there is predominantly Shi'a, and when you go to the checkpoints, they've got Iraqi police, Iraqi army and coalition force, kind of what we have now modeled and done inside of Baghdad too.

And I was talked to him about, you know -- you know, I -- everything I'd heard, I said, before I came back out here, I said, on this deployment was, you know, that you all didn't want us out here, that most people are opposed to our presence and all that. And he

looked at me and he goes, General, it is true: We don't want you here, and I want you to leave, but not right yet, not until we gain greater security here.

And I found that very illuminating in the fact that one, I've got it coming from a Sunni, telling me he doesn't want me to leave yet, and secondly, acknowledging the fact that he does though one day. I mean, they do want that, and I think we all recognize that, but it's not right now. And as I've looked at, as we call it, atmospherics, that we kind of pick up and track, over the last year, I can tell you that the number of people that want us to remain right now has continued to rise over the last -- I'd say it started about eight months ago, going on the upswing. Or you can say the downswing of the number that want us to leave, however you want to look at it.

But more Iraqis today want us to stay than there were eight months ago. So I would question if somebody's saying that they're finding more Iraqis that want us to leave. I'd say, that's not at all what we are tracking and picking up in atmospherics as we -- and again, we do that on a fairly consistent, regular basis to gauge things, and it's not what we're seeing. It's moreso now they're recognizing that it's -- the teamwork there actually is helping bring down the levels of violence when it exists.

Q All right, thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. Did -- I was looking for Bill Roggio or David (last name inaudible). Did either of you join me? Okay. Do we have any follow-up questions?

Q General, I did. It's Blake Dvorak from Real Clear Politics.

I read a story in The New York Times -- I believe it was yesterday or the day before -- that Ayatollah al-Sistani has come out rejecting, you know, the sort of re-Ba'athification of the government. And this has been interpreted a number of ways. One is that this is a severe setback in the political sphere. I was wondering if you were able to talk at all about that element.

GEN. CALDWELL: I can. We read the same over-the-source reporting that Sistani had supposedly said that.

Q Yeah?

GEN. CALDWELL: But the method and the means by which it was done is not really consistent with how we have seen it done in the past. It was done a little differently, which -- I don't know what that quite means. But it could mean that perhaps it wasn't quite as interpreted or transmitted as accurately if it was in fact from him as it normally is. Because they've got -- he actually has a very set process he uses when he puts messages out that you can track back and say, yeah, that probably is actually from him.

And I say that like we're experts. We're not. But even the government of Iraq officials that I've engaged with and asked have a little bit of a question about what may or may not have been said. And I think everybody's just seeking a little further clarification at this point because how it was done was not normally how it's done.

Q So it's unclear whether Sistani actually has --

GEN. CALDWELL: That's correct.

Q -- spoken.

GEN. CALDWELL: Yeah. We're not -- and I say "we" -- many members of the government of Iraq, too, because we obviously went to them first and said, "Do you think this is accurate?" And they'll be the first to tell you, well, that's not normally how it's done, and so I would question perhaps if it is accurate and we probably need to seek clarification.

Q Thank you very much, General.

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right. We're about to run out of time here.

Q Can I actually just ask one quick question, Jack?

MR. HOLT: Sure. I think you can.

Q General Caldwell, there were some conflicting reports over the weekend about the behavior of the press corps at Senator McCain's press conference. Some said that he was heckled. That appeared to be untrue. Others reported that some of the reporters were laughing at his assertions of the improvements of the security situation in Baghdad. And I was just wondering if you were there and had any additional light to throw on this.

GEN. CALDWELL: I was not at his press conference, so I really couldn't. I mean, if you really want to know, I'll be glad to go back and talk to my personnel that actually run the Combined Press Information Center there and just get a personal take from them and get back to you on e-mail or something like that if you would like. But --

Q That would be great.

GEN. CALDWELL: But I was not personally present, so I couldn't answer that one.

Q Okay. Thanks.

GEN. CALDWELL: Okay. Afterwards, if I can just make sure I've got your e-mail address, that would be great, and then we'll get back to you.

Q Will do.

MR. HOLT: All right. And as we're about out of time here, General, have you got any closing comments, anything to wrap this up?

GEN. CALDWELL: No. I would just tell everybody that, you know, we're continuing to push hard at this thing. We've got plenty of challenges ahead. I mean, there's a lot of reasons to look out there and you do see some signs of progress starting to occur, but we also see the sensational car bombs that still go off. You know, we've got to get at those things. But there are a lot of other positive indicators that tell us we could be -- this could be moving in the right direction. But again, it's going to take some time before anybody would ever make that type of assertion, as we bring the last of the forces still in here too that we're going to use as part of this overall effort.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Well, we appreciate your time and being with us again today, and look forward to do this again in the future.

GEN. CALDWELL: Well, I just want to say to you all, thank you very much for what you do. You all have an extremely important role that you play out there. And we spend a lot of time actually watching to see what is being said and what are the issues out there, and you're an immediate source we go to to look. And so I just -- thanks for what you all do, do to help inform people and tell people what's going on over here. I appreciate that.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, General.

Q Thanks for your time, General.

MR. HOLT: Appreciate it.

Q Thank you, sir.

GEN. CALDWELL: Thank you. All right. Bye-bye.

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